

OPINION

School matters

The school district is engaged in planning for the future

Steve Tozzi

Anaconda School Trustee Chair

I read with interest Lee Ann Bartoletti's editorial in which she said she was dumbfounded and perplexed by the Buildings and Grounds Committee meeting. One of the most difficult aspects of being Board Chair is keeping people informed with facts versus rumors and other noise. I understand some members of the public are upset and confused as to why the district is considering spending projects while simultaneously talking about budget constraints and the need to study building consolidation. I can see why that would confuse anyone who has not been fully engaged in following the district's activities. While the meeting may have left Mrs. Bartoletti feeling dumbfounded, those who have followed the board's activities beyond just the past couple months are aware of the facts. By writing this letter, my intention is not to attack Mrs. Bartoletti, but rather to use her comments as a means of educating those who seek a better understanding.

The school board was not "bombarded with lists of repairs and ideas to spend money on buildings that may or may not be consolidated and/or closed in the near future." First of all, it was a Buildings and Grounds Committee meeting, not a school board meeting.

Secondly, this "bombardment" was actually a list of projects that the school board approved on April 24, 2012. Yes, that's right. These projects were approved by the school board to be funded with Tax Increment Finance Industrial District money nearly two years ago. The purpose of last week's meeting was to revisit the list of projects and review the progress made. Nearly all the projects on the list have already been completed. There are a few remaining projects that did not get completed prior to the TIFID funds being frozen, and it was requested that new bids be obtained for completion of this work. Therefore, the statement that we are engaging in "impulse spending" is not accurate.

The remaining projects from that list would use up 11 percent of the available TIFID money (based on the old bid amounts). Interestingly enough, it was at that April 24, 2012 meeting where the board passed a motion to approve a task force to study the feasibility of possible school consolidation due to declining enrollment and costs of operating unneeded facilities. The committee eventually formed in the fall of 2013.

The surprise bombshell news that an architect was in place and already involved in the plans for spending \$5 million dollars on the Mitchell Stadium repair was not news at all. We held several board meetings with the architects in 2012 in which we were presented with the architect's plans for

the renovation. We toured the stadium, studied options, asked questions of the architects, and were moving forward with a bond issue to be decided by the taxpayers. Now that the TIFID funds are once again available, we are simply picking up where we left off.

Those Mitchell Stadium meetings that took place over several months were highly attended and some had to be moved to larger venues to accommodate the large numbers in attendance, albeit the attendees were not entirely the same folks who are showing up at the consolidation meetings. There have been other periods in which great interest was shown in the board's work and we have always listened to the voices of those concerned, whether it was the Booster Club, the PTA, the supporters of a coach or the parents of special-needs children (as well as those concerned about special-needs children in our schools).

Another statement made in Mrs. Bartoletti's letter was that Chairman Lorengo tabled the plans. Nothing was tabled. While trustee Lorengo is doing a tremendous job leading the difficult process of studying consolidation, he was simply stating his opinion that money should not be put into a building that may close and he would like to see updated bid amounts. It is important to understand these projects have already been approved by the board. No comments, opinions or suggestions made at a committee meeting can undo the vote of the full board and one trustee does not have the authority to do this. Every action requires a vote of the full board. No vote was taken to disapprove the projects which were already approved. No such recommendation for a vote was given to the board by Mr. Lorengo.

Consolidation, if approved, would not take place immediately and there are certainly some repairs that are needed now for the students currently in those buildings. The board is nearing the end of its strategic planning process for the future. Admittedly, it has not been completed as fast as I would like, and I take responsibility for that, but to state that this board is not engaged in planning is unfair.

In a traditional TIFID, the captured tax revenue is used to improve the industrial or commercial



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district rather than reducing property taxes. Anaconda's TIFID is slightly different, in that the captured revenue is currently being used to improve the community of Anaconda as a whole (county and schools). The district leadership collectively believes it would be irresponsible to spend TIFID funds on expenses that are not aligned with the intention of why these funds are captured by the district; and that intention has been primarily for infrastructure improvements. In other words, TIFID money should not be used for bolstering the operating budget. When that money is no longer available, the district would be left with an enormous hole to fill. It would be extremely dangerous for the board to use that Band-Aid approach and dig a grave for the future of our school district. Therefore the stance of the board has always been TIFID money should be used for necessary repairs which the operating budget would not allow for. And yes, Mitchell Stadium is one of the necessary repairs and is every bit as important as the other facilities. The idea that repairing a stadium somehow detracts from the quality of education we provide is not based in reality.

This board has commissioned a committee to study consolidation. We are looking down the road and being proactive. We refuse to kick the can down the road for the next superintendent and future boards. We want to provide quality education while

being fiscally responsible with our budget and the future of this district. We are adjusting to declining enrollment and shrinking funds. Given the choice of losing a building, or losing programs such as art, music, PE, counseling, Vo-Tech, etc., we choose to explore losing a building. Losing educational programs means a loss of educational quality. Losing a building does not.

Running a school board is a balancing act and every decision is likely to upset some and satisfy others. Managing school finance is one of the most complex and difficult aspects of being a trustee. There are many different funds with different purposes and governmental restrictions. You elect us to put in the hours to learn the intent and rules governing each budget, and to spend the budget in a manner that is in the best interest of our kids. I hope this letter conveys to you some reassurance that we are doing just that.

Steve Tozzi is the chairman of the Anaconda Public School Trustees.